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Opening Extract from...

Juliet

Written by Anne Fortier

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I.I

Alack, alack, what blood is this which stains
The stony entrance of this sepulchre?

It has taken me a while to decide where to start. You could argue that my story began more than six hundred years ago, with a highway robbery in mediaeval Tuscany. Or, more recently, with a dance and a kiss at Castello Salimbeni, when my parents met for the first time. But I would never have come to know any of this without the event that changed my life overnight and forced me to travel to Italy in search of the past. That event was the death of my great-aunt Rose.

It took Umberto three days to find me and tell me the sad news. Considering my virtuosity in the art of disappearing, I am amazed he succeeded at all. But then, Umberto always had an uncanny ability to read my mind and predict my movements, and besides, there were only so many Shakespeare summer camps in Virginia.

How long he stood there, watching the theatre performance from the back of the room, I do not know. I was backstage as always, too absorbed in the kids, their lines and props, to notice anything else around me until the curtain fell. After the dress rehearsal that afternoon, someone had misplaced the vial of poison, and for lack of anything better, Romeo would have to commit suicide by eating Tic Tacs.

'But they give me heartburn!' the boy had complained, with all the accusatory anxiety of a fourteen-year-old.

'Excellent!' I had said, resisting a motherly urge to adjust the velvet hat on his head. 'That'll help you stay in character.'

Only when the lights came on afterwards, and the kids dragged me onstage to bombard me with gratitude, did I notice the familiar figure looming near the exit, contemplating me through the applause. Stern and statuesque in his dark suit and tie, Umberto stood out like a lone reed of civilization in a primordial swamp. He always had. For as long as I could remember, he had never worn a single piece of clothing that could be considered casual. Khaki shorts and golf shirts, to Umberto, were the garments of men who have no virtues left, not even shame.

Later, when the onslaught of grateful parents subsided and I could finally leave the stage, I was stopped briefly by the programme director, who took me by the shoulders and shook me heartily – he knew me too well to attempt a hug. 'Good job with the youngsters, Julie!' he gushed. 'I can count on you again next summer, can't I?'

'Absolutely,' I lied, walking on. 'I'll be around.'

Approaching Umberto at last, I looked in vain for that little spark of happiness in the corner of his eyes that was usually there when he saw me again after some time away. But there was no smile, not even a trace, and I now understood why he had come. Stepping silently into his embrace, I wished I had the power to flip reality upside down like an hourglass, and that life was not a finite affair, but rather a perpetually recurring passage through a little hole in time.

'Don't cry, principessa,' he said into my hair, 'she wouldn't have liked it. We can't all live forever. She was eighty-two.'

'I know. But . . .' I stood back and wiped my eyes. 'Was Janice there?'

Umberto's eyes narrowed as they always did when my twin sister was mentioned. 'What do you think?' Only then, up close, did I see that he looked bruised and bitter, as if he had spent the last few nights drinking himself to sleep. But perhaps it had been

a natural thing to do. Without Aunt Rose what would become of Umberto? For as long as I could remember, the two of them had been yoked together in a necessary partnership of money and muscle – she had played the withering belle, he the patient butler – and despite their differences, clearly neither of them had ever been willing to attempt life without the other.

The Lincoln was parked discreetly over by the fire pit, and no one saw Umberto placing my old pack in the trunk before opening the back door for me with measured ceremony.

'I want to sit in front. Please?'

He shook his head in disapproval and opened the passenger door instead. 'I knew it would all come apart.'

But it had never been Aunt Rose who insisted on the formality. Although Umberto was her employee, she had always treated him like family. The gesture, however, was never returned. Whenever Aunt Rose would invite Umberto to join us at the dinner table, he would merely look at her with bemused forbearance, as if it was an ongoing wonder to him why she kept asking and just somehow didn't get it. He ate all his meals in the kitchen, always had, always would, and not even the name of sweet Jesus – spoken in rising exasperation – could persuade him to come and sit down with us, even at Thanksgiving.

Aunt Rose used to dismiss Umberto's peculiarity as a European thing and smoothly segue into a lecture about tyranny, liberty, and independence that would inevitably culminate in her pointing a fork at us and snorting, 'and that is why we are *not* going to Europe on vacation. Especially Italy. End of story.' Personally, I was fairly certain that Umberto preferred to eat alone simply because he considered his own company vastly superior to what we had to offer. There he was, serene in the kitchen, with his opera, his wine, and his perfectly ripened block of Parmesan, while we – Aunt Rose, me, and Janice – bickered and shivered in the drafty dining room. Given the option, I would have lived every minute of every day in the kitchen, too.

As we drove through the dark Shenandoah Valley that night,

Umberto told me about Aunt Rose's last hours. She had died peacefully, in her sleep, after an evening of listening to all her favourite Fred Astaire songs, one crackling record after another. Once the last chord of the last piece had died out, she had stood up and opened the French doors to the garden outside, perhaps wanting to breathe in the honeysuckle one more time. As she stood there, eyes closed, Umberto told me, the long lace curtains had fluttered round her spindly body without a sound, as if she was already a ghost.

'Did I do the right thing?' she had asked, quietly.

'Of course you did,' had been his diplomatic answer.

It was midnight by the time we rolled into Aunt Rose's driveway. Umberto had already warned me that Janice had arrived from Florida that afternoon with a calculator and a bottle of champagne. That did not, however, explain the second vehicle parked right in front of the entrance.

'I sincerely hope,' I said, taking my pack out of the trunk before Umberto could get to it, 'that is *not* the undertaker.' No sooner had I said the words then I winced at my own flippancy. It was completely unlike me to talk like that, and it only ever happened when I came within earshot of my sister.

Casting a brief glance at the mystery car, Umberto adjusted his jacket as if it was a bulletproof vest. 'I fear there are many kinds of undertaking.'

As soon as we stepped through the front door of the house, I saw what he meant. All the large portraits in the hallway had been taken down and were now standing with their backs to the wall like delinquents before a firing squad. And the Venetian vase that had always stood on the round table beneath the chandelier was already gone.

'Hello?' I yelled, with a surge of rage that I had not felt since my last visit. 'Anyone still alive?'

My voice echoed through the quiet house, but as soon as it had

faded I heard running feet in the corridor upstairs. Yet despite her guilty rush, Janice had to make her usual slow-motion appearance on the broad staircase, her flimsy summer dress emphasizing her sumptuous curves far better than if she had worn nothing at all. Pausing for the world press, she tossed back her long hair with languid self-satisfaction and sent me a supercilious smile before commencing her descent. 'Lo and behold,' she observed, her voice sweetly chilled, 'the virgitarian has landed.' Only then did I notice the male flavour-of-the-week trailing right behind her, looking as dishevelled and bloodshot as one does after time alone with my sister.

'Sorry to disappoint,' I said, dropping my backpack on the floor with a thud. 'Can I help you strip the house of valuables, or do you prefer to work alone?'

Janice's laughter was like a little wind chime on your neighbour's porch, put there exclusively to annoy you. 'This is Archie,' she informed me, in her business-casual way. 'He is going to give us twenty grand for all this junk.'

I looked at them both with disgust as they came towards me. 'How generous of him. He obviously has a passion for trash.'

Janice shot me an icy glare, but quickly checked herself. She knew very well that I couldn't care less about her good opinion, and that her anger just amused me.

I was born four minutes before her. No matter what she did, or said, I would always be four minutes older. Even if, Janice's own mind, she was the hypersonic hare and I the plodding turtle, we both knew she could run cocky circles around me all she liked, but that she would never actually catch up and close that tiny gap between us.

'Well,' said Archie, eyeing the open door, 'I'm gonna take off. Nice to meet you, Julie – it's Julie, isn't it? Janice told me all about you.' He laughed nervously. 'Keep up the good work! Make peace not love, as they say.'

Janice waved sweetly as Archie walked out, letting the screen

door slam behind him. But as soon as he was out of hearing range, her angelic face turned demonic. 'Don't you dare look at me like that!' she sneered. 'I'm trying to make us some money. It's not as if you're making any, is it now?'

'But then I don't have your kind of . . . expenses.' I nodded at her latest upgrades, eminently visible under the clingy dress. 'Tell me, Janice, how *do* they get all that stuff in there? Through the navel?'

'Tell me, Julie,' mimicked Janice, 'how does it feel to get nothing stuffed in there? Ever!'

'Excuse me, ladies,' said Umberto, stepping politely between us the way he had done so many times before, 'but may I suggest we move this riveting exchange to the library?'

Once we caught up with Janice, she had already draped herself over Aunt Rose's favourite armchair, a gin and tonic nestling on the foxhuntmotif cushion I had cross-stitched as a senior in high school while my sister had been out on the prowl for upright prey.

'What?' She looked at us with ill-concealed loathing. 'You don't think she left half the booze for me?'

It was vintage Janice to be angling for a fight over someone's dead body, and I turned my back to her and walked over to the French doors. On the terrace outside, Aunt Rose's beloved terra-cotta pots sat like a row of mourners, flower heads hanging beyond consolation. It was an unusual sight. Umberto always kept the garden in perfect order, but perhaps he found no pleasure in his work now that his employer was no longer around to appreciate it.

'I am surprised,' said Janice, swirling her drink, 'that you are still here, Birdie. If I were you I would have been in Vegas by now. With the silver.'

Umberto did not reply. He had stopped talking directly to Janice years ago. Instead, he looked at me. 'The funeral is tomorrow.'

'I can't believe,' said Janice, one leg dangling from the armrest, 'you planned all that without asking us.'

'It was what she wanted.'

'Anything else we should know?' Janice freed herself from the embrace of the chair and straightened out her dress. 'I assume we're all getting our share? She didn't fall in love with some weird pet foundation or something, did she?'

'Do you mind?' I croaked, and for a second or two, Janice actually looked chastened. Then she shrugged it off as she always did, and reached once more for the gin bottle.

I didn't even bother to look at her as she feigned clumsiness, raising her perfectly groomed eyebrows in astonishment to let us know that she certainly had not intended to pour quite so much. As the sun slowly melted into the horizon, so would Janice soon melt into a chaise longue, leaving the great questions of life for others to answer as long as they kept the alcohol coming.

She had been like that for as long as I remembered: insatiable. When we were children, Aunt Rose used to laugh delightedly and exclaim, 'That girl, she could eat her way out of a gingerbread prison,' as if Janice's greediness was something to be proud of. But then, Aunt Rose was at the top of the food chain and had, unlike me, nothing to fear. For as long as I could remember, Janice had been able to sniff out my secret candy no matter where I hid it, and Easter mornings in our family were nasty, brutish, and short. They would inevitably climax with Umberto chastising her for stealing my share of the Easter eggs, and Janice – teeth dripping with chocolate – hissing from underneath her bed that he wasn't her daddy and couldn't tell her what to do.

The frustrating thing was that she didn't look her part. Her skin stubbornly refused to give away its secrets; it was as smooth as the satin icing on a wedding cake, her features as delicately crafted as the little marzipan fruits and flowers in the hands of a master confectioner. Neither gin nor coffee nor shame nor remorse had been able to crack that glazed façade; it was as if she had a perennial spring of life inside her, as if she rose every morning

rejuvenated from the well of eternity, not a day older, not an ounce heavier, and still ravenously hungry for the world.

Unfortunately, we were not identical twins. Once, in the schoolyard, I had overheard someone referring to me as Bambi-on-stilts, and although Umberto laughed and said it was a compliment, it didn't feel that way. Even when I was past my most clumsy age, I knew I still looked lanky and anemic next to Janice; no matter where we went or what we did, she was as dark and effusive as I was pale and reserved.

Whenever we entered a room together, all the spotlights would immediately turn to her, and although I was standing there right beside her, I became just another head in the audience. As time went on, however, I grew comfortable with my role. I never had to worry about finishing my sentences, for Janice would inevitably do that for me. And on the rare occasions when someone asked about my hopes and dreams – usually over a polite cup of tea with one of Aunt Rose's neighbours – Janice would pull me away to the piano, where she would attempt to play while I turned the sheets for her. Even now, at twenty-five, I would still squirm and grind to a halt in conversations with strangers, hoping desperately to be interrupted before I had to commit my verb to an object.

We buried Aunt Rose in the pouring rain. As I stood there by her grave, heavy drops of water fell from my hair to blend with the tears running down my cheeks; the paper tissues I had brought from home had long since turned to mush in my pockets.

Although I had been crying all night, I was hardly prepared for the sense of sad finality I felt as the coffin was lowered crookedly into the earth. Such a big coffin for Aunt Rose's spindly frame . . . now I suddenly regretted not having asked to see the body, even if it would have made no difference to her. Or maybe it would? Perhaps she was watching us from somewhere far away, wishing she could let us know that she had arrived safely. It was a consoling idea, a welcome distraction from reality, and I wished I could believe it.

The only one who did not look like a drowned rodent by the end of the funeral was Janice, who wore plastic boots with five-inch heels and a black hat that signalled anything but mourning. In contrast, I was wearing what Umberto had once labelled my Attila-the-Nun outfit; if Janice's boots and neckline said *come hither,* my clunky shoes and buttoned-up dress most certainly said *get lost.*

A handful of people showed up at the grave, but only Mr Gallagher, our family lawyer, stayed to talk. Neither Janice nor I had ever met him before, but Aunt Rose had mentioned him so often and so fondly that the man himself could only be a disappointment.

'I understand you are a pacifist?' he said to me, as we walked away from the cemetery together.

'Jules loves to fight,' observed Janice, walking happily in the middle, oblivious to the fact that the brim of her hat was funnelling water onto both of us, 'and throw stuff at people. Did you hear what she did to the Little Mermaid?'

'That's enough,' I said, trying to find a dry spot on my sleeve to wipe my eyes one last time.

'Oh, don't be so modest! You were on the front page!'

'And I hear your business is going very well?' Mr Gallagher looked at Janice, attempting a smile. 'It must be a challenge to make everyone happy?'

'Happy? Eek!' Janice narrowly avoided stepping in a puddle. 'Happiness is the worst threat to my business. Dreams are what it's all about. Frustrations. Fantasies that never come true. Men that don't exist. Women you can never have. That's where the money is, date after date after date . . .'

Janice kept talking, but I stopped listening. It was one of the world's great ironies that my sister was into professional matchmaking, for she was probably the least romantic person I had ever known. Notwithstanding her urge to flirt with every one of them, she saw men as little more than noisy power tools that you plugged

in when you needed them and unplugged as soon as the job was done.

Oddly enough, when we were children, Janice had had an obsession with arranging everything in pairs, two teddy bears, two cushions, two hairbrushes . . . even on days when we had been fighting, she would put both our dolls next to each other on the shelf overnight, sometimes even with their arms around each other. In that respect it was perhaps not so strange that she would choose to make a career out of matchmaking, seeing that she was a genuine Noah at putting people in pairs. The only problem was that, unlike the old patriarch, she had long since forgotten why she did it.

It was hard to say when things had changed. At some point in high school she had made it her mission to burst every dream I might ever have had about love. Running through boyfriends like cheap nylon tights, Janice had taken a peculiar pleasure in disgusting me by describing everybody and everything in such a dismissive way that it made me wonder why women bothered with men at all.

'So,' she had said, rolling pink curlers into my hair on the night before our prom, 'this is your last chance.'

I had looked at her in the mirror, puzzled by her ultimatum but prevented from responding by one of her mint-green mud masks that had dried to a crust on my face.

'You know,' she had grimaced impatiently, 'your last chance to pop the cherry. That's what prom's all about. Why do you think the guys dress up? Because they like to dance? Puh-*leez*!' She had glanced at me in the mirror, checking her progress. 'If you don't do it at prom, you know what they say. You're a prude. Nobody likes a prude.'

The next morning, I had complained about a stomachache, and as the prom came closer, my pains grew worse. In the end, Aunt Rose had to call the neighbours and tell them that their son had better find himself another date for the evening; meanwhile, Janice

was picked up by an athlete called Troy and disappeared in a smoke of squealing tyres.

After listening to my moans all afternoon, Aunt Rose began insisting that we go to the hospital in case it was appendicitis, but Umberto had calmed her down and said that I did not have a fever, and that he was certain it was nothing serious. As he stood there next to my bed later in the evening, looking at me peeking out from underneath my blanket, I could see that he knew exactly what was going on, and that, in some strange way, he was pleased with my scam. We both knew there was nothing wrong with the neighbours' son as such, it was just that he did not fit the description of the man I had envisioned as my lover. And if I could not get what I wanted, I would rather miss the prom.

'Dick,' Janice now said, stroking Mr Gallagher with a satin smile, 'why don't we just cut to the chase. How much?'

I did not even try to intervene. After all, as soon as Janice got her money, she would be off to the eternal hunting grounds of the bushy-tailed wannabe, and I would never have to set eyes on her again.

'Well,' said Mr Gallagher, stopping awkwardly in the car park, right next to Umberto and the Lincoln, 'I'm afraid the fortune is almost entirely tied up in the estate.'

'Look,' said Janice, 'we all know it's fifty-fifty down to the last nickel, okay, so let's cut the crap. She wants us to draw a white line down the middle of the house? Fair enough, we can do that. Or,' she shrugged as if it was all the same to her, 'we simply sell the place and split the money. How much?'

'The reality is that in the end,' Mr Gallagher looked at me with some regret, 'Mrs Jacobs changed her mind and decided to leave everything to Miss Janice.'

'What?' I looked from Janice to Mr Gallagher to Umberto, but found no support at all.

'Holy shit!' Janice flared up in a broad smile. 'The old lady had a sense of humour after all!'

'Of course,' Mr Gallagher went on, more sternly, 'there is a sum put aside for Mr . . . for Umberto, and there is a mention of certain framed photographs that your great-aunt wanted Miss Julie to have.'

'Hey,' said Janice, opening her arms, 'I'm feeling generous.'

'Wait a minute.' I took a step back, struggling to take in the news. 'This doesn't make any sense.'

For as long as I could remember, Aunt Rose had gone through hell and high water to treat us equally; for heaven's sake, I had even caught her counting the number of pecans in our morning muesli to make sure one of us didn't get more than the other. And she had always talked about the house as something that we, at some point in the future, would own together. 'You girls,' she used to say, 'really need to learn how to get along. I won't live forever, you know. And when I am gone, you are going to share this house.'

'I understand your disappointment,' said Mr Gallagher.

'Disappointment?' I felt like grabbing him by the collar, but stuck my hands in my pockets instead, as deep as they could go. 'Don't think I'm just accepting this. I want to see the will.' Looking him straight in the eye I saw him squirming under my gaze. 'There's something going on here behind my back.'

'You were always a sore loser,' Janice broke in, savouring my fury with a catty smile, 'that's what's going on.'

'Here.' Mr Gallagher clicked open his briefcase with shaky hands and handed me a document. 'This is your copy of the will. I'm afraid there's not much room for dispute.'

Umberto found me in the garden, crouched under the arbour he had once built for us when Aunt Rose was in bed with pneumonia. Sitting down next to me on the wet bench, he did not comment on my childish disappearing act, just handed me an immaculately ironed handkerchief and observed me as I blew my nose.

'It's not the money,' I said, defensively. 'Did you see her smirk?

Did you hear what she said? She doesn't care about Aunt Rose. She never did. It's not fair!'

'Who told you life was fair?' Umberto looked at me with raised eyebrows. 'Not me.'

'I know! I just don't understand – but it's my own fault. I always thought she was serious about treating us equally. I borrowed money.' I clutched my face to avoid his stare. 'Don't say it!'

'Are you finished?'

I shook my head. 'You have no idea how finished I am.'

'Good.' He opened his jacket and took out a dry but slightly bent manila envelope. 'Because she wanted you to have this. It's a big secret. Gallagher doesn't know. Janice doesn't know. It's for you only.'

I was immediately suspicious. It was very unlike Aunt Rose to give me something behind Janice's back, but then, it was also very unlike her to write me out of her will. Clearly, I had not known my mother's aunt as well as I thought, nor had I fully known myself until now. To think that I could sit here, today of all days, and cry over money. Although she had been in her late fifties when she adopted us, Aunt Rose had been like a mother to us, and I ought to be ashamed of myself for wanting anything more from her.

When I finally opened it, the envelope turned out to contain three things: a letter, a passport, and a key.

'This is my passport!' I exclaimed. 'How did she . . .?' I looked at the picture page again. It was my photo all right, and my date of birth, but the name was not mine. 'Giulietta? Giulietta Tolomei?'

'That is your real name. Your aunt changed it when she brought you here from Italy. She changed Janice's name, too.' I was stunned. 'But *why*? . . . How long have you known?' He looked down. 'Why don't you read the letter?' I unfolded the two sheets of paper. 'You wrote this?' 'She dictated it to me.' Umberto smiled sadly. 'She wanted to make sure you could read it.' The letter read as follows:

My dearest Julie,

I have asked Umberto to give you this letter after my funeral, so I suppose that means I am dead. Anyway, I know you are still angry that I never took you girls to Italy, but believe me when I say that it was for your own good. How could I ever forgive myself if something happened to you? But now you are older. And there is something there, in Siena, that your mother left for you. You alone. I don't know why, but that was Diane for you, bless her soul. She found something, and supposedly it is still there. By the sound of it, it was much more valuable than anything I have ever owned. And that is why I decided to do it this way, and give the house to Janice. I was hoping we could avoid all this and forget about Italy, but now I am beginning to think that it would be wrong of me if I never told you.

Here is what you must do. Take this key and go to the bank in Palazzo Tolomei. In Siena. I think it is for a safety deposit box. Your mother had it in her purse when she died. She had a financial advisor there, a man called Francesco Maconi. Find him and tell him that you are Diane Tolomei's daughter. Oh, and that is another thing. I changed your names. Your real name is Giulietta Tolomei. But this is America. I thought Julie Jacobs made more sense, but no one can spell that either. What is the world coming to? No, I have had a good life. Thanks to you. Oh, and another thing: Umberto is going to get you a passport with your real name. I have no idea how you do these things, but never mind, we will leave that to him.

I am not going to say goodbye. We will see each other again in heaven, God willing. But I wanted to make sure you get what is rightly yours. Just be careful over there. Look what happened to your mother. Italy can be a very strange place. Your great-grandmother was born there, of course, but I'll tell you, you couldn't have dragged her back there for all the money in the world. Anyway, don't tell

anyone what I have told you. And try to smile more. You have such a beautiful smile, when you use it.

Much love & God bless, Auntie

It took me a while to recover from the letter. Reading it, I could almost hear Aunt Rose dictating it, just as wonderfully scatterbrained in death as she had been when she was still alive. By the time I was finished with Umberto's handkerchief, he did not want it back. Instead, he told me to take it with me to Italy, so that I would remember him when I found my big treasure.

'Come on!' I blew my nose one final time. 'We both know there's no treasure!'

He picked up the key. 'Are you not curious? Your aunt was convinced that your mother had found something of tremendous value.'

'Then why didn't she tell me earlier? Why wait until she's . . .' I threw up my arms. 'It doesn't make sense.'

Umberto squinted. 'She wanted to. But you were never around.'

I rubbed my face, mostly to avoid his accusatory stare. 'Even if she was right, you know I can't go back to Italy. They'd lock me up so fast. You know they told me . . .'

Actually, they – the Italian police – had told me significantly more than I had ever passed on to Umberto. But he knew the gist of it. He knew that I had once been arrested in Rome during an antiwar demonstration, and spent a very unrecommendable night in a local prison before being tossed out of the country at daybreak and told never to come back. He also knew that it hadn't been my fault. I had been eighteen, and all I had wanted was to go to Italy and see the place where I was born.

Pining in front of my college's bulletin boards with their gaudy ads for study trips and expensive language courses in Florence, I had come across a small poster denouncing the war in Iraq and all the countries that took part in it. One of those countries, I was excited to discover, was Italy. At the bottom of the page

was a list of dates and destinations; anyone interested in the cause was welcome to join in. One week in Rome, travel included, would cost me no more than four hundred dollars, which was precisely what I had left in my bank account. Little did I know that the low fare was made possible by the fact that we were almost guaranteed to *not* stay the whole week, and that the tab for our return flights and last night's lodgings would – if all went according to plan – be picked up by the Italian authorities, that is, the Italian taxpayers.

And so, understanding very little about the purpose of the trip, I circled back to the poster several times before finally signing up. That night, however, tossing around in my bed, I realized I had done the wrong thing and that I would have to undo it as soon as possible. But when I told Janice the next morning, she just rolled her eyes and said, 'Here lies Jules, who didn't have much of a life, but who *almost* went to Italy once.'

Obviously, I had to go.

When the first rocks started flying in front of the Italian Parliament – thrown by two of my fellow travellers, Sam and Greg – I would have loved nothing more than to be back in my dorm room, pillow over my head. But I was trapped in the crowd like everyone else, and once the Roman police had had enough of our rocks and Molotov cocktails, we were all baptized by tear gas.

It was the first time in my life I found myself thinking, *I could die now.* Falling down on the asphalt and seeing the world – legs, arms, vomit – through a haze of pain and disbelief, I completely forgot who I was and where I was going with my life. Perhaps like the martyrs of old, I discovered another place; somewhere that was neither life nor death. But then the pain came back, and the panic, too, and after a moment it stopped feeling like a religious experience.

Months later, I kept wondering if I had fully recovered from the events in Rome. When I forced myself to think about it, I got this nagging feeling that I was still forgetting something crucial

about who I was – something that had been spilled on the Italian asphalt, and never come back.

'True.' Umberto opened the passport and scrutinized my photo. 'They told Julie Jacobs she can't return to Italy. But what about Giulietta Tolomei?'

I did a double take. Here was Umberto, who still scolded me for dressing like a flower child, urging me to break the law. 'Are you suggesting. . .?'

'Why do you think I had this made? It was your aunt's last wish that you go to Italy. Don't break my heart, principessa.'

Seeing the sincerity in his eyes, I struggled once more against the tears. 'But what about you?' I said gruffly. 'Why don't you come with me? We could find the treasure together. And if we don't, to hell with it! We'll become pirates. We'll scour the seas . . .'

Umberto reached out and touched my cheek very gently, as if he knew that, once I was gone, I would never come back. And should we ever meet again, it would not be like this, sitting together in a child's hideaway, our backs turned against the world outside. 'There are some things,' he said softly, 'that a princess has to do alone. Do you remember what I told you . . . one day you will find your kingdom?'

'That was just a story. Life isn't like that.'

'Everything we say is a story. But nothing we say is *just* a story.'

I threw my arms around him, not yet ready to let go. 'What about you? You're not staying here, are you?'

Umberto squinted up at the dripping woodwork. 'I think Janice is right. It's time for old Birdie to retire. I should steal the silver and go to Vegas. It will last me about a week, I think, with my luck. So make sure to call me when you find your treasure.'

I leaned my head against his shoulder. 'You'll be the first to know.'